

CALVIN'S MIDDLE YEARS (1536-1541)

Laurie A. P. Copeland*

Early Genevan Ministry

After the fiery French evangelist Guillaume Farel implored John Calvin to stay in Geneva, Calvin agreed to surrender his pursuit of a life as a contented scholar and remain to assist Farel to reform the city in accordance to the will of God. Sixteenth century Geneva was a middle class city with a small number of wealthy merchants. Surrounding Geneva were cliffs near the sea, forming walls of protection from enemy attacks. A city of refuge for many French and Italian believers, Geneva later became the city of the esteemed Swiss watch, through the ideals of John Calvin (at the time he outlawed jewelry, resulting in increased watch sales and improved technology). Although relying on the support of Berne, a Swiss Protestant city, French-speaking Geneva was an independent city-state near the borders of France, Switzerland, and Italy. Governing Geneva were several city councils (magistrates). British author T. L. Parker notes that on May 26, 1536, "Geneva had become by constitution an evangelical city."¹ Consequently, Geneva's City Council banned the Roman Catholic mass and swept its churches of relics, including the sparkle and glitter.

Accordingly, Calvin at twenty-seven began his work in September 1536 with the position of "Professor of Sacred Letters."² Parker states, "This may mean he preached without performing any other parochial duties or that he gave expository lectures on the Bible."³ Not yet ordained into the ministry, Calvin received high praise for his inspiring sermons while preaching the Pauline Epistles.⁴ Elected pastor in November 1537, Calvin was working full time in the Genevan church Saint Pierre, a former Gothic-Roman Catholic Church divested of its icons, while retaining the stained glass windows.

Although serving as a pastor, the complete details on Calvin's ordination ceremony are somewhat sketchy. Biographer John T. McNeill says, "the widely held opinion that he was never ordained to the ministry seems to rest upon the absence of evidence bearing on the point amid the scant records of his early weeks in Geneva."⁵ However, "Calvin himself strongly urged ordination, with the imposition of hands, at a synod held in Zurich, in 1538, and in various writings he stresses the importance of the rite."⁶ In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he mentions that ordinations should take place "at stated times of the year in order that no one might creep in secretly without the consent of the believers, or be too readily promoted without witnesses."⁷ Further, he says, "I accepted the charge having the authority of a lawful vocation."⁸ Calvin's ordination seems certain.

At this time Farel, twenty years Calvin's senior, was serving as a senior pastor in another church. Historian Philip Schaff tells us, "But with rare humility and simplicity he yielded very soon to the superior genius of his young friend."⁹ Laboring for the glory of God, Calvin and Farel endeavored to reform Geneva and make it the benchmark for a Christian society. Calvin wrote three documents while in Geneva, the *Confession of Faith of 1536*, *Articles on the*

Organization of the Church and its Worship at Geneva, and a *Catechism of the Church at Geneva*.¹⁰ Schaff describes Calvin's *Confession* as consisting of "Twenty-one articles in which the chief doctrines of the evangelical faith are briefly and clearly stated for the comprehension of the people. It begins with the Word of God, as the rule of faith and practice, and ends with the duty to the civil magistracy."¹¹ Theologian James T. Dennison reveals some concerns surrounding the authorship of Calvin's *Confession* saying, "The authorship of the confession is still disputed—some favoring Calvin, others Farel, others arguing for co-authorship."¹²

Meanwhile, the City Council enacted the *Confession*, the *Articles on the Organization of the Church*, and *Catechism*, into law on January 16, 1537; but the acceptance of the *Articles* created dissention, especially among the Anabaptists (who denied infant baptism), with whom Calvin had strongly disagreed. The *Articles* described the church's rights to exercise ecclesiastical discipline independent of the City Council. Theologian Joel Beeke explains that, "People particularly objected to the church's use of excommunication to enforce church discipline."¹³ Sovereign authority meant the church had the power to determine who was worthy to take the Lord's Supper, and to excommunicate immoral persons. Calvin believed church discipline was necessary for the purity of the church, but that power was God-given to the church and not rather to civil authorities (cf. Matt 18:15-19). "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim 2:19). Consequently, Calvin and Farel implemented aggressive reform of the church, which resulted in persecution, especially from the Libertines, who largely were free thinkers. Theologian Henry B. Smith recounts how "he was feared and opposed by the Libertines of his day, as he is in our own."¹⁴ Forced to swear to the teachings of the *Confession*, citizens who resisted could not retain their citizenship, but would face banishment. McNeill says, "A good many remained in opposition, and even when the councils gave them the alternative of banishment, their resistance continued."¹⁵

And so, desiring to prohibit unrepentant persons (those who failed to comply with the confession) from taking the Lord's Supper, Calvin argued that the pastors should have the power to prohibit the unworthy and excommunicate the impenitent.¹⁶ In January 1538 Geneva ruled that every citizen had the right to take the Lord's Supper and that no minister had permission to exclude anyone.¹⁷ Denying the Reformers their rights to exercise independent control over ecclesiastical discipline caused a tumult to erupt from within the council.

Moreover, in March 1538 Geneva adopted the Swiss city Berne's liturgy without the consultation of Calvin or Farel and violated the prior agreement described in the *Articles*, which had given Geneva's ecclesiastical power to the church. Outraged at the new proposal, Calvin and Farel refused to honor the new Genevan ordinances or celebrate the Lord's Supper on Easter because of the widespread immorality. Dennison describes how the two Reformers responded saying:

Hence when Calvin and Farel refused to administer the Lord's Supper at Easter 1538, the resulting public protests drove the two from Geneva. They were permitted three days to clear out of town. By the spring of 1538, the Geneva Confession was a dead letter.¹⁸

After the resulting commotion between the Reformers and the council, they were banished from the city.

Life in Strasbourg

As exiles, Calvin and Farel departed from Geneva, going first to Berne and Zurich and then to Basel. According to Schaff, “In Basel they were warmly received by sympathizing friends.”¹⁹ Staying for two months, Farel accepted a call to a church in Neuchatel (Switzerland), where he stayed for the remainder of his life.²⁰ In September 1538 Calvin traveled to German-speaking Strasbourg, a free imperial city, where, at the invitation of Martin Bucer, a former Dominican monk and Strasbourg Reformer, he served as pastor of a church with about four or five hundred French refugees. Bucer, a pioneer in the development of a Protestant liturgy, already had largely organized a city-state church, which was helpful to Calvin in his later ministry in Geneva (1541).

At this time Strasbourg was the international capital for the Reformation community, “known as the Antioch of the Reformation,” and most of the French refugees went there from France to escape persecution.²¹ Pastoring what Calvin called the “little French Church,” was a joyful time in Calvin’s life.²² Describing his pastoral diligence, Schaff says, “He conscientiously attended to pastoral care, and took a kindly interest in every member of his flock. In this way, he built up in a short time a prosperous church, which commanded the respect and admiration of the community of Strassburg.”²³ “He preached four times a week (twice on Sunday), and held Bible classes.”²⁴ Calvin also published a Psalter and the Apostle’s Creed.²⁵

In addition, Calvin rewrote and enlarged his second Latin edition of the *Institutes*, from six chapters to seventeen, paying more attention to his theology, while maintaining the same theological doctrines that were consistent throughout his life. Author Ford Lewis Battles notes that, “A large increment of Augustinian material enters the 1539 edition for the first time.”²⁶ Augustine’s influence on Calvin’s theology was large. Calvin rendered a French version for French believers with the purpose that Calvin describes: “...to aid those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation.”²⁷ Theologian B. B. Warfield says, “The first French edition of the ‘Institutes,’ then, that of 1541, is a careful translation by Calvin himself (as the title-page and Preface alike inform us) of the second Latin edition of 1539.”²⁸ Translating the *Institutes* from Latin into French helped advance the French language.

Moreover, in 1540 Calvin published a commentary on the book of Romans, the first of his twenty-two volumes of Bible commentaries, which included theological subjects on sin, justification, sanctification, and predestination. Calvin said, “For when anyone understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture.”²⁹ Hence, the Epistle to the *Romans* is a crucial book to the discovery and knowledge of God. The German Protestant August Tholuck describes Calvin’s Romans commentary: “In his [Calvin’s] Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans are united pure Latinity, a solid method of unfolding and interpreting, founded on the principles of grammatical science and historical knowledge, a deeply penetrating faculty of mind, and vital piety.”³⁰ His first commentary is only the beginning of some of the most exquisite writings in church history.

While pastoring and publishing various works, Calvin met Idelette de Bure, the widow of a former Anabaptist who converted to the Reformed faith. Idelette had been attending the “little church” with her husband and their two little children before Idelette’s husband died from an illness. In August 1540 Calvin and Idelette married and enjoyed a happy marriage.

Meanwhile, trying to unite the divisions occurring between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestants, Calvin attended several conferences in Frankfurt, Worms, and Regensburg and met the German scholar Philip Melancthon, with whom he developed a close relationship. Melancthon, an associate of Martin Luther and a learned man, wrote the presentation and apology for the *Augsburg Confession*. Throughout Calvin’s life he corresponded with Melancthon through numerous letters, and their friendship continued.

Previously, Bucer laid the groundwork for the Protestant community with his liturgical work; his influence was helpful to Calvin in the development of his own liturgy. Combining his ideals with those of Bucer, Calvin rendered a French liturgy that would be useful in his final Genevan ministry; it later became known as the *Genevan Liturgy*. Calvin closely observed the work of other men and learned from them. Schaff states, “Calvin built his form of worship on the foundation of Zwingli and Farel, and the services already in use in the Swiss Reformed Churches.”³¹ In the worship of God Calvin believed in maintaining theological and biblical integrity.³² Calvin’s liturgy consisted of Scripture, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 NKJV). Theologian John Leith notes, “Calvin gave serious attention to the theme.”³³ He believed that the Bible alone was “to be the rule of faith and life,” and not adding to the Word of God, will worship, except what Scripture commanded (cf. Rev 22:18-19).³⁴ Calvin regarded preaching (in the vulgar tongue of the people) central to the worship.³⁵ “Nothing which does not lead to edification ought to be received into the Church.”³⁶ Calvin asserts, “In preaching, language must be used to communicate thought, not to impress the hearers with the speaker’s learning.”³⁷ Every element of worship should be with the objective of edification.³⁸ Calvin was always in pursuit of God’s honor. Accordingly, outward display had no importance, as Leith reveals, “Feeling, emotion, aesthetics and beauty were all subordinate to theological soundness.”³⁹ Moreover, Schaff explains, “He had no sympathy whatever with Roman Catholic ceremonialism which was overloaded with unscriptural traditions and superstitions.”⁴⁰ Orthodoxy superseded outward display.

In 1539 the esteemed Italian scholar, Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, Archbishop of Carpentras, accused the Genevan Protestants of jeopardizing the unity of the church. Schaff describes Sadoleto as “leaning towards a moderate semi-evangelical reform from within the Catholic Church.”⁴¹ Parker tells us that Sadoleto “addressed a letter to the council calling Geneva back to the faith of its fathers.”⁴² Writing an exposition of the Catholic doctrines to Geneva, Sadoleto provided an eloquent argument for the Catholic faith, but failed to mention the Scriptures.⁴³ This event brewed zeal in Calvin, as Schaff explains, “But Calvin, having read it at Strasbourg, forgot all his injuries, and forthwith answered it with so much truth and eloquence, that Sadoleto immediately gave up the whole affair as desperate.”⁴⁴ Calvin reasoned from the Scriptures with wisdom: “Our cause, as it is supported by the truth of God, will be no loss for a complete defense.”⁴⁵ With great persuasion, Calvin defended the Reformed doctrines. Seen as a type of savior, Calvin rescued Geneva from its former entanglement and yoke of

Roman Catholicism. This event highlights an “important and interesting controversy which occurred in the Germany period of Calvin’s life, and left a permanent impression on history.”⁴⁶ Parker declares, “This is one of that brilliant set of writings which emerged from his stay in Strasbourg and which, purely as literature, he never surpassed.”⁴⁷

Return trip to Geneva

In the meantime the city of Geneva was much different from the time of Calvin’s banishment. Subsequent to Calvin and Farel’s displacement, the city plummeted to near destruction.⁴⁸ The problems consisted of “internal disturbances,” and it was during this time that the former exile would return, rebuild, and revive the nearly desolate city.⁴⁹ Calvin’s writings to Sadoletto caught the attention of the Genevan officials, and many of his former opponents now wanted him back. British author Diarmaid MacCulloch describes Calvin’s situation:

He did not forget his Strassburg experiences when in 1541 he had the remarkable satisfaction of finding himself invited back to Geneva by a chastened set of city governors. The religious chaos had dispersed, and the only remedy they could see was to reemploy their austere former guest.⁵⁰

Albeit, because of the former opposition he experienced during his earlier Genevan ministry, this was not an easy move for Calvin. Nevertheless, Calvin left Strasbourg and returned to Geneva. It turned out that his experience in Strasbourg was the preparation for such a time as this.

Although the Genevan officials sent Calvin and Farel away as disgraced exiles, indigent and unemployed, God purposed to use it for the good. We are “persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:9). Calvin’s exile was an exceedingly bitter time for him; he left Geneva as an outcast, but returned as a savior. In addition, it turned out that Calvin’s Strasbourg ministry was the most enjoyable time of his life. He entered into a blessed marriage with a woman he cherished. He enjoyed a prosperous ministry to the dear people of God at his “little French church,” and he wrote some of the most brilliant theological writings in church history. We can never fully understand God’s providential workings, but, “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

*Laurie Copeland, a WRS graduate (M.R.S. 2008), maintains an active ministry on the internet and teaches and mentors women and children in the Reformed faith. She and her husband live in Seattle.

¹ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 79.

² John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 136.

³ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 80.

⁴ Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss, Editors, *Opera Calvini (Corpus Reformatorum)* 10b, 91, quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 80.

⁵ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book 4:4:10, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1079.

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- ⁸ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 137.
- ⁹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church* (reprinted; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 8:350.
- ¹⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* (Great Britain: Christian, Focus Publications, 2004), 61. The reader can find Calvin's Confession in James. T. Dennison's book on Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries: Vol. I.
- ¹¹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:353.
- ¹² James T. Dennison, Compiler, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 1:394.
- ¹³ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 61.
- ¹⁴ Henry B. Smith, *Faith and Philosophy*, "Address before General Assembly of Presbyterian Church," St. Louis 1855, 98-9, quoted in Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:293.
- ¹⁵ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 142.
- ¹⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 62. The reader can find a simple recap of what occurred in Reymond's book.
- ¹⁷ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 142.
- ¹⁸ James T. Dennison, Compiler, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, 1:394.
- ¹⁹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:361.
- ²⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 65.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:369.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:368.
- ²⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 66. These songs were sung *a cappella*.
- ²⁶ Ford Lewis Battles, Assisted by John R. Walchenbach, *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1980), 13.
- ²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (French translation), quoted in B. B. Warfield's "Calvin and Calvinism," *In The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 5:390.
- ²⁸ B.B. Warfield, "On the Literary Criticism of the Institutes." *In The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 5:392.
- ²⁹ John Calvin, "The Epistle of Paul to the Romans," Vol XIX. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 24.
- ³⁰ Fr. August Tholuck, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," 3d ed. 1831, 19, quoted in Phillip Schaff, *The Swiss Reformation*, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:282.
- ³¹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:371.
- ³² John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1981), 175.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 1:2.
- ³⁵ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁶ John H. Leith, "Form of Administering Baptism," *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on Corinthians*, 1 Cor 2:3-7, 1:98-104, quoted in John H. Leith, "Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community", 176.
- ³⁸ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ⁴⁰ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:371.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8:400.
- ⁴² T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 104.
- ⁴³ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:401.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:399.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:405.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:399.
- ⁴⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 104.
- ⁴⁸ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:425. Subsequent to Calvin's banishment, the regime was "demoralized and split up into factions."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Dairmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 191-192.